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ABSTRACT

Briefly described are suggestions to help special educators keep their level of stress manageable. Suggestions are extracted from "Stress and Burnout--A Primer for Special Education and Special Services Personnel" by Stan Shaw et al. To better organize their time and activities, educators are advised to set realistic and flexible professional goals and objectives, establish priorities, leave their work at school, pace themselves, use available human resources, and organize their classrooms. Educators are also encouraged to be open to innovation and new opportunities by changing their environment, keeping themselves motivated, considering career options, and seeking out personal learning experiences. Additional suggestions deal with being positive about themselves and their profession, with tips on allowing a "moment of glory" when receiving positive feedback, looking for the "silver lining," becoming directly involved, and remembering the children being served. (JDD)

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THE COUNCIL FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN
1920 Association Drive • Reston, VA 22091-1589
FAX (703) 264-9494

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FOURTEEN TIPS TO HELP SPECIAL EDUCATORS DEAL WITH STRESS

It cannot be denied; education is a stressful business. In a recent CEC member survey, 60% of the respondents rated work related stress between 7 and 9 on a 10-point scale. Major causes of stress included too much paperwork, lack of time, attitudes of others, and student behavior. Listed below are 14 tips to help keep stress manageable.

Organize Your Time and Your Activities

1. *Set realistic and flexible professional goals and objectives.* Don't set expectations that will be impossible to meet—that only results in failure, frustration, and guilt. Sharing those inflated expectations with others (e.g., telling regular classroom teachers you can consult with them twice weekly while you are carrying full time direct service responsibilities) creates additional pressure that results in stress. Setting expectations too low, on the other hand, can create lethargy and lack of motivation.

2. *Establish priorities.* Each day there seem to be many jobs which must get done. It is helpful to establish priorities to deal with needs in the order of importance. As one job at a time is successfully tackled, a sense of accomplishment can develop. You may discover that low priority items may not have to be done at all.

3. *Leave your work at school.* One of the major problems educators face is bringing work home after school. This causes problems in that schoolwork never seems to be finished, and it often interferes with personal and family life. One way to break that cycle is to avoid bringing work home. Some educators have found staying at school later in the afternoon may be required. Another alternative is going into school very early in the morning to grade papers, do planning, and set up the classroom. Staying in school until as late as seven or eight o'clock on a Friday evening may allow you to enjoy the remainder of the weekend without having schoolwork hanging over your head. Planning a late dinner on Friday night (candles, wine, and children in bed—all optional) may be very therapeutic.

4. *Pace yourself.* Managing time is certainly a key to dealing with stress. Approaches to help avoid wasting time and prevent procrastination include setting realistic time lines, getting high priority work done early in the day (when we tend to work most efficiently), and including time for yourself in each day. Do not try to do everything at once. If you are a new special educator you should not expect to master every aspect of the profession immediately. Nor should you expect to be able to meet everyone else's needs in terms of consultant services, diagnostic evaluations, and so on, while providing direct service to children. It is necessary to pace yourself, not only each day, but for each week and each year. The social worker or psychologist who wants to revise the entire placement team process or modify the role of special services personnel should expect that goal to take considerable time to fulfill. Small steps to achieving those goals should be identified and cherished.

5. *Use available human resources.* Use the available human resources to their maximum potential. Take the extra time necessary to train an aide or secretary to handle more responsibilities independently. Training students or parent volunteers as classroom aides can result in greatly increased instructional time without increasing your workload.

6. *Organize your classroom.* Improved classroom organization can save time and increase professional productivity. Setting up a catalog system for materials, tests, and instructional techniques can make these resources more accessible to you and to other professionals who have need of them.

   Similarly, developing a general filing system or computerized management system so that diagnostic information, IEPs, student performance data, and curriculum objectives are available can improve classroom efficiency. Organizing the classroom so that students can function independently by preparing work folder learning centers or student contracts may free you to attend more directly to individual student needs. Giving students access to classroom materials such as books, paper, pencils, audiovisual equipment, self correcting materials, and training them in their use can likewise improve the learning environment.

Be Open to Change, Innovation, and New Opportunities

7. *Change your environment.* Changing roles from resource teacher to special class teacher, for example, may reduce stress by allowing you to focus on direct service instead of having to cope with the additional demands of diagnosis and consulting. A school counselor who moves from a high school to a junior high school situation may find the job description at the new school more satisfactory. A simple change in environment from one elementary school to another may give you a new perspective, new friends, different students, and new supervisors.

8. *Keep yourself motivated.* It is important to keep motivated. Seeking out new experiences can be one way to maintain professional interest and prevent stagnation. A special educator can try new instructional techniques, implement alternative programs, or develop new materials. A school psychologist can add a test to his or her test battery or try a new counseling technique. Look for opportunities to share your expertise—Present your project at a CEC federation or national conference; submit your curriculum or research to the ERIC database.

9. *Consider career options.* There are many alternative career avenues that special educators and special services personnel should consider to diversify their experience or stimulate interest. Career options include placement team coordinator, itinerant diagnostician, work study coordinator, consultant, and inservice coordinator. In some districts, educators have the option of taking one of those roles for one year and then return, refreshed, to previous responsibilities. There are also many opportunities for part time jobs or job sharing (two educators share one job—one works two days per week, the other three) which may provide a change of pace for weary professionals.

10. *Seek out personal learning experiences.* Professional and personal growth requires that we keep learning. Certification requirements and school salary schedules encourage educators to take additional coursework. Seek programs of study that are interesting and stimulating as well as appropriate for meeting requirements. Programs that provide new skills needed on the job (i.e., consulting, teaching reading, diagnosis) or that broaden your base of knowledge (a special educator taking courses in psychology or sociology) are ideal. Dropping a course that is irrelevant, poorly taught, or too time consuming may also be very therapeutic. Seeking out personal learning experiences can likewise add productive dimensions to an educator's experience. Taking classes in ceramics, knitting, car maintenance, or home repair, for example, can provide a myriad of benefits. Not only do they develop new skills and interests, but they might even save you money.

Be Positive About Yourself and Your Profession

11. *Allow a "moment of glory."* Too often, schools are not very positive places to be. Students, supervisors, parents, and colleagues do not often tell you what a great job you're doing. It is, therefore, important for special educators and special services personnel to accept and acknowledge positive feedback. When someone does praise you, don't reject it. We are very good at allowing false modesty ("I didn't really do anything special") or embarrassment to rob us of our just rewards. A response like, "Yes, I really worked hard and it's gratifying to see the results; it means a lot to me that you've noticed," will not only allow you your moment of glory but will encourage the person gracious enough to bestow some positive reinforcement on a fellow human being.

12. *Look for the "silver lining."* It is often helpful to seek out the "silver lining" in an otherwise dismal situation. As a consultant to regular classroom teachers, it is not unheard of to walk into a classroom that has received hours of your support only to find calamity prevailing. At that point it is easy to give up in total frustration. A better alternative, however, is to try to find some glimmer of hope in that situation (e.g., "It could have been worse if I hadn't been there; her behavior management techniques were terrible but she was teaching a good lesson.") or to immediately go to another classroom where the teacher has succeeded by implementing your recommendations.

13. *Become directly involved.* In many cases, working directly to deal with the issues that cause problems can be both therapeutic and productive. Become active in your professional association to institute desired changes. Work with CEC's Political Action Network to influence state and federal legislation. Becoming a member of an inservice training advisory board, curriculum committee, or a task force of the local teachers association may allow you to effectively deal with problems causing stress for yourself and your colleagues. On the other hand, resigning from a committee that is causing frustration or is simply wasting your time, can also be therapeutic.

14. *Remember the children you serve.* Remember why you have chosen to be a special education teacher or member of the special services staff. Focus on the personal, professional, and philosophical reasons that give meaning to your working hours. Keeping your thoughts on the handicapped children you serve, your pride in professional accomplishments, and your empathy for those who society often rejects, will help you cope with a narrow minded principal, difficult parents, an inane meeting, or the endless paperwork that passes through your hands.

These ideas are based on suggestions presented in *Stress and Burnout—A Primer for Special Education and Special Services Personnel* by Stan F. Shaw, Jeffrey M. Bensky, and Benjamin Dixon, 1981, 61 pp. A CEC/ERIC Publication, The Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091. Stock No. 223. $6.25 (CEC Member Price $5.00) U.S. Funds.

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